DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 417 417 CS 216 248

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TITLE	Roots of a New American Literacy: Hmong Writing in Laos and the U.S.
PUB DATE	1998-00-00
NOTE	6p.; "English Update" is published by the Center on English Learning and Achievement.
PUB TYPE	Journal Articles (080) -- Reports - Research (143)
JOURNAL CIT	English Update; p3 Spr 1998
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Cultural Context; Foreign Countries; *Hmong People; *Literacy; *Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS	*Discourse Communities; *Historical Background; Laos; Wisconsin (North)

ABSTRACT

This article delineates a study which examines both the historical basis of Hmong literacy development (in the years before they left Laos) as well as the more recent history (since 1975) of a Hmong group that settled in northern Wisconsin. The article discusses the development and functions of literacy in the United States, particularly as experienced by an ethnic minority. The article focuses on the different uses of writing among the Hmong in Wisconsin, how literacy practices are shaped by the majority discourse, and the ways in which writers appropriate the majority discourse and use it for their own purposes. (NKA)

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...F A NEW AMERICAN LITERACY:

...nong writing ...in Laos and the U.S.

MAI NA MOUA, AN ELDERLY HMONG woman who left her native Laos after the Vietnam War and now lives in Wisconsin, recalls the first time she ever saw written language.* As a child she accompanied her father on a trip from their village in the remote Laotian highlands to a nearby city, where she saw writing on the doors of shops, on street signs, and in the notebooks of the local merchants.

For Teng Vang, a Hmong veteran of the CIA-sponsored "Secret Army" of Laos, literacy came in the context of war and Christian faith. As a soldier, Vang was trained to keep records and write reports for his battalion commander. "We would put down, for example, 'Today we went to fight the Communists. Did we win or lose? How many of us died?'" Later Vang would become an evangelical Christian and learn for the first time to read and write his native Hmong language, albeit in an alphabet developed by French and American missionaries.

BY
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*The Hmong, an ethnic group originally from China, emigrated to Southeast Asia in the 19th century. In the 1950s and '60s, the Hmong of Laos were recruited by the U.S. CIA to assist the war effort against North Vietnam. After the war, thousands of Hmong fled Laos and resettled in the U.S. All names in this article are pseudonyms.

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Over the past few years, I have been studying both the historical basis of Hmong literacy development (in the years before they left Laos) as well as the more recent history (since 1975) of a group that settled in northern Wisconsin. My purpose is to explore the development and functions of literacy in the U.S., particularly as these have been experienced by an ethnic and linguistic minority culture. I am seeking to determine how literacy is acquired in such cultures; the social and political influences that shape literacy development; and how such influences are communicated.

Students, Soldiers, and Christians: Literacy in Laos

In Laos, Hmong people were typically introduced to literacy in the context of three powerful institutions — Laotian public schooling, the U.S. backed Hmong military, and missionary Christianity. Each of these provided a language and set of literacy practices in which the Hmong were expected to define themselves. In the Laotian public schools, where the Lao government sought to instill a sense of patriotism and national unity in a country of diverse minority cultures, Hmong children studied Laotian language, history, and traditions.

Military bureaucracy and Christian cosmology offered the Hmong other identities and ways of understanding themselves and the world. For example, NaLue Hang recalls that his first experiences of written language came when French priests came to his village and began teaching Bible studies along with mathematics, history, and other subjects. "[T]he priests came in and they teach us how to read and write, and . . . they gave us a Bible — a very simple one for you to take home to read, so I learn how to read a lot from those Bibles."

For Hmong soldiers, the military offered the chance to use the literacy skills they had learned in Laotian public schools or through their Bible lessons. The bureaucracy of the war demanded record keeping and various forms of military correspondence. Hmong soldiers who were exposed to these literacy practices became skilled letter writers — a talent that would be called upon and learned by others when the Hmong began leaving Laos to migrate to the West and were separated from family and friends.

Remembering, Organizing, and Resisting: Hmong Literacy in the U.S.

In the U.S., the Hmong have continued to learn to read and write in the context of powerful institutions whose various discourses act to shape the way individuals see themselves. Virtually all Hmong children in this country attend U.S. schools, where they are introduced to a new language and set of cultural values. For many adults, English literacy has been learned in the context of Christian churches that have "sponsored" refugee families, or in the context of low wage employment, in which reading and writing practices are organized to serve the needs of the employer. Hmong people who do not find employment participate in yet another powerful discourse that demands specialized literacy practices and social behaviors — the world of public assistance and its applications, regulations, and other forms of documentation.

The narrative of Hmong literacy in this one Wisconsin community, however, is not one in which Hmong people are irresistibly shaped by dominant discourses and their corresponding literacy practices. Rather, the story is very much about the ways in which Hmong writers have used literacy to remember their past, organize themselves, and resist racism directed at them in the community. In many homes, for example, people are using word processors to write their autobiographies, chronicling their often tumultuous experiences in Laos and the United States. Zer Chang, a Hmong teacher and mother, has said that she wants to keep a record of her history

for her children, "for those who will grow up not knowing much about their family history, why we are here, our participation in [the war] and of our love for our country and our people."

Other Hmong use reading and writing in the context of community organizations that provide information and assistance.

Many Hmong are using writing as a way to tell the story of the Hmong to members of the majority culture, many of whom are indifferent or even hostile to the local Hmong community. When a letter to the local newspaper complained that Hmong people ate dogs, a Hmong community leader wrote back to dispute this and other rumors. Such texts by Hmong writers illustrate not only how Hmong literacy practices are shaped by the majority discourse, but also the ways in which writers appropriate the majority discourse and use it for their own purposes.

What is emerging from this study are insights into the literacy traditions and aspirations of an American minority culture, one that has been described in educational literature as "preliterate," and whose children have often been taught under the assumption that their parents have no familiarity with written language. The study also explores ways in which learning to read and write takes place in the context of powerfully shaping discourses that influence social meanings and the construction of individual identities. The accounts of the Hmong writers suggest, however, that while such discourses do indeed exert extreme pressure on individuals and cultures, they can also be re-imagined in ways that offer new forms of cultural and political expression.

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